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ABSTRACT

The political scandals known as Watergate provided an unusual opportunity to study the importance of attitudinal and cognitive variables in media research. In order to assess the impact of Watergate during the months preceding the 1974 Congressional elections, 339 personal interviews were conducted during October with a probability sample of registered voters living in Syracuse, New York. Interviews focused on attitudinal reactions to Watergate, level of information about the scandal, and the voting behaviors and decisions regarding the state gubernatorial, U.S. Senatorial, and local Congressional elections. The long-term effects of Watergate were assessed in terms of changes in party affiliation, voter choice, changes in political interest, changes in political activity, and turnout. Results show interesting patterns of media effects on the two types of variables, with attitudinal variables affecting political decisions and activity. For cognitive variables, the evidence of continual impact is less convincing. Tables of findings are included. (JM)

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Explaining Long-Term Watergate Effects

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Attitudes Vs. Cognitions:

Explaining Long-Term Watergate Effects

Historically, communication research has shown an imbalance in favor of the study of persuasive effects. The media's impact on such non-attitudinal responses as cognitions held by audience members has been relegated to secondary interest, despite the promise of early research examining such variables. While recent reassessments of the role of the media by Blumler and McLeod (1974), Clarke and Kline (1974), Becker, McCombs and McLeod (1975), and others have indicated the fertility of research on cognitions, few studies have systematically compared attitudinal and cognitive effects within the same study. As a result, the relative predictive power of attitudinal and cognitive variables in studying second-order communication effects has not been examined.

Historical Basis for Attitudinal Focus

It is easy to understand the focus on persuasive media effects in early research in the field. Two of the most important programs of communication research even to this date were begun prior to World War Two in an atmosphere of fear and concern over supposed massive effects of the media. The apparently successful use of the media to stir audience emotions by demagogues in this country and Europe led social scientists to assume massive media effects and focus much of their early research on simplistic message analyses. When Hovland and his colleagues (Hovland, 1957; Hovland and Janis, 1959; Rosenberg, Hovland, McGuire, Abelson and Brehm, 1960) began to systematically test this assumption through the manipulation of message and related variables, the

criterion effect was usually attitudinal. The Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research studies of media effects in political campaigns (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet, 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954; McPhee and Glaser, 1962) similarly aimed most of the analyses at isolating media effects on partisan attitudes and preferences.

Despite this focus on attitudes, some of the most dramatic findings from these early studies dealt with media effects on cognitions. Hovland, Lumsdaine and Sheffield (1949), for example, found strong effects of the military indoctrination film series, Why We Fight, on information gain, but less consistent evidence of general attitude change. In addition, the cognitive and attitudinal effects were found to be unrelated. And Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) found in their study of the 1948 Presidential election that exposure during the campaign led to an increased understanding on the part of the electorate of the candidates' stands on key issues as well as fuller knowledge of voter support for the political contestants. These findings held even after controls for political interest of the respondents and their education levels.

The attitudinal findings from these two programs of research, however, are the most often cited. Hovland and his colleagues are credited with having demonstrated media effects on attitudes, at least under certain conditions. The Columbia researchers are cited as having found little evidence the media played an important, direct effect on candidate preferences. The demonstrated effects of the media on information gain have been largely ignored; the role of such cognitive variables in understanding indirect media effects have not often been pursued.

Watergate and Media Effects

The political scandals we have come to know as Watergate provided an unusual opportunity to study the importance of attitudinal and cognitive variables in media research. The vast amount of coverage given the events by the media and the almost total dependence of the audience on these outlets for news of the scandals made media effects on attitudes and cognitions likely. Indeed, Chaffee and Becker (1975), Becker (1976) and others have provide evidence supporting this expectation.

The real concern with Watergate, however, has been not with such short-range effects of the scandals but with long-term impact. To the extent the electorate generalized from these scandals to political behavior in general and, as a result, became more cynical about political life and more suspicious of political leaders, Watergate became a crisis of extreme proportions. Public opinion polls during the Watergate period, reviewed by McLeod, Brown and Becker (1975a), suggested such a change in public sentiment might be taking place. But the picture was clouded by trends in these social indicators which began before Watergate.

The role of attitudes and cognitions in determining long-range effects took on a new, pragmatically focused significance during Watergate. These attitudes and cognitions could serve as intermediate effects between exposure to the media and subsequent political activity. If Watergate were to have impact, in this view, it would be through the link between these attitudes and cognitions and subsequent behavior. If attitudes or cognitions were to dominate as predictors of such second-level effects of media exposure, Watergate provided the ideal opportunity.

The Setting of the Study

Speculation concerning long-term Watergate effects was at its height during the months preceding the 1974 Congressional elections. Richard Nixon was forced from office by the scandal during August; Gerald Ford rendered the controversial pardon of his predecessor the following month. As a result, the October campaign was carried out under a veil of national scandal.

To assess the impact of Watergate during this period, 339 personal interviews were conducted during October with a probability sample of registered voters living on the east side of Syracuse, N.Y.[1] The district was chosen because of its diverse social composition as well as its proximity to Syracuse University.[2] The interview schedule focused on attitudinal reactions to Watergate, level of information about the scandal, and voting behaviors and decisions regarding the state gubernatorial, V.S. Senatorial and local Congressional elections. In each of these campaigns, Watergate was at least an implicit issue.

Attitudinal Reactions to Watergate

To ascertain diverse attitudinal reactions to the scandal, a nonprobability sample of approximately 50 persons was interviewed in September. Respondents were asked to indicate what Watergate had meant to them; probes were designed to further elicit responses. From these interviews, 23 items varying along two dimensions were written. The first set of items asked respondents to agree with various statements about the consequences of Watergate. The second set of items required respondents to assign blame for the scandals to various sources. These items were pretested and then included on the October interview schedule.

Separate factor analyses for the two sets of attitudinal questions reduced them to six responses groups. Items not showing a correlation of at least .65 with any factor were eliminated from further analyses.

1. Watergate Unfair. A high score indicates agreement with these statements: (a) Richard Nixon was forced out of office by his long-time political enemies; (b) The country would be better off if the House Judiciary Committee hadn't debated impeachment; (c) Watergate was just an isolated incident and is not representative of American political activity in general;

2. Watergate Activation. A high score indicates agreement with these statements: (a) Watergate has made me more aware of what's going on in this country; (b) Watergate has made me more determined to try to clean up politics; (c) Watergate occurred because the executive branch of government has become too powerful.

3. Watergate Cynicism. A high score indicates agreement with these statements: (a) Watergate is just an example of what goes on in politics; (b) Watergate just proves politicians can't be trusted; (c) Watergate shows that the individual voter has little say about how the government operates.

4. Political System to Blame. A high score indicates respondent holds the following responsible for Watergate: The political system, Republican Party, Democratic Party.

5. Nixon's Friends/Staff to Blame. A high score indicates respondent holds the following responsible for Watergate: Nixon's White House staff and advisers; Nixon's friends; the Committee to Re-Elect the President.

6. Human Nature to Blame. A high score indicates the respondent holds the following responsible for Watergate: Human nature, a breakdown in American morality.

Cognitive Effect of Watergate

Level of information held about the Watergate scandal was measured by six separate questions regarding events or figures prominent in the Watergate scandal. Respondents were asked to identify the judge who sentenced the Watergate burglars (Sirica), Alexander Butterfield (who revealed the existence of the White House tapes), Peter Rodino (who chaired the House Judiciary Committee), the first special prosecutor (Cox), the current special prosecutor (Jaworski) and to give the date of the Watergate burglary (June 1972).

Watergate Media Exposure

Exposure to the Watergate scandal in the media was measured via three items. The first asked for amount of attention to the scandal in the media over its two-year history; the second item asked for attention to the Judiciary Committee hearings; the final item asked for amount of attention to the Senate Committee hearings.

Long-Term Watergate Effects

The effects of Watergate were assessed in terms of changes in party affiliation, vote choice, changes in political interest, changes in political activity, and turnout.

1. Party Affiliation. The interview schedule asked each respondent to indicate with which of the official parties in New York he or she identified.

The respondent's official party registration was taken from voter registration records, providing a control against which to evaluate the self-reported party identification.

2. Vote Choice. Each respondent was asked his or her candidate preferences in the gubernatorial race, the Senatorial race and the Congressional race. For each of these analyses, official party registration will be considered as the control variable. In addition, respondents were asked for whom they would have voted in 1972 had they known about Watergate as well as their actual 1972 vote, which serves as the control.

3. Political Interest. Each respondent was asked to indicate interest in the current campaign on a four-point scale as well as interest in politics in general. The latter serves as the control.

4. Political Activity. Campaign activity was assessed by way of a check-list for the following behaviors during the campaign: (a) passing out leaflets; (b) wearing a campaign button or displaying a sticker; (c) attempting to convince someone to vote for a candidate; (d) trying to find out more about the candidates. General political activity, which serves as the control for evaluating the effects of Watergate on campaign activity, was measured via the following items: (a) attended a governmental meeting; (b) written a letter to the editor; (c) written to or contacted a governmental leader. The respondent was asked if he or she had done these during the last year.

5. Turnout. Official, individual voting records were used to measure actual voter turnout at the polls. Data from previous elections were used as controls.

Results

The correlations among the measures of attitudinal and informational reactions to Watergate are shown in Table 1. While these relationships are only tangential to the question of relative predictive power of these variables, several interesting patterns worth comment emerge from these comparisons.

The correlations in the upper left-hand triangle in Table 1 show mild relationships among the three attitudinal clusters of statements regarding Watergate. Respondents who thought Watergate was unfair or an isolated incident showed a slight tendency toward rejection of the feeling that Watergate focused attention on political reform. Those accepting the statements about the unfairness of Watergate also tended to be cynical about the whole scandal, though the relationship is very weak. And cynicism is slightly related to acceptance of the activation statements as well.

The correlations in the lower right-hand triangle indicate some tendency for respondents who blamed one source for Watergate to spread that blame to other sources as well. Those who blamed the system for the scandal also tended to blame Nixon's staff. Those who blamed the staff showed a slight tendency to blame human nature as well.

The correlations between the attitudinal statement clusters and the blame dimension indicate that acceptance of the unfair nature of Watergate is positively associated with blaming human nature and negatively associated with blaming Nixon's staff. Acceptance of the activation statements is positively related to blaming the staff and unrelated to the other two blame factors.

Cynicism about Watergate is related only to blaming the system. The three statement clusters sort the individuals in terms of blame as well. The correlations serve as a nice check on the discriminant power of the two sets of factors as well as providing a fuller understanding of the dimensions of attitudinal response to the scandal.

The bottom row of entries in Table 1 shows that the knowledge variable is significantly related to three of the six attitudinal clusters. Those voters who think Watergate was unfair to Nixon tended to be uninformed about the scandal while those who were cynical about Watergate tended to be informed, as were those who blamed Nixon and his staff for the scandal. None of these correlations is extremely large, however, and in general there is no strong case for the redundancy of the attitudinal and informational variables.

The correlations between the attitudinal and informational variables and exposure to the Watergate scandals in the news media are shown in Table 2. As McLeod, Brown and Becker (1975a, 1975b) have argued, demonstrating such relationships are a necessary first step in establishing effects of Watergate on the populace and illustrating the media's role in determining Watergate's impact.

Those voters who paid attention to the scandals in the media tended to reject the attitudinal statements measuring the unfairness of the scandal, accept the idea that Watergate increased their awareness of politics, and blame Nixon and his colleagues for the scandal. The strongest relationship, however, is between exposure to the stories in the media and knowledge about the scandals. Media use, however, did not lead to cynicism about politics, blame of the political system, or blame of human nature.

Partitioning the sample on official party registration and educational le fails to change the essential nature of these overall findings. There does se to be a negative effect of media exposure on cynicism for the highly educated voters (15 or more years of schooling) and the suggestion that the reverse is true for the less educated. Consistent relationships across subgroups hold, however, for the unfairness, activation and blaming of staff measures as well as for the knowledge measure.

The educational control is particularly important for the knowledge varia since it rules out the possibility the exposure-knowledge relationship is a spurious one due to the relationship of both variables to education. Similarl the party registration control shows that the exposure-knowledge as well as th exposure-attitude correlations are not due simply to the effects of party.

Table 2 presents rather convincing evidence the media had effects on thos who watched and read about the Watergate scandals. Though data not shown here indicate selective exposure to the Watergate story in the form of significantl higher media use on the part of the Democrats compared with the Republicans ($t=4.23$, $p < .05$), there is little evidence the media's impact was selective. Essentially the same conclusion holds for education. More educated persons followed the story more ($t=2.56$, $p < .05$), but within education groups the medi effects were similar, with the single exception noted.

While it is theoretically interesting to show such short-term media effec national concern about the scandal tended to focus on changes in more deep-seated attitudes and behaviors which might be attributable to Watergate. The expectation that the attitudes and information level variables were intermediat

in producing such long-term effects is tested in Table 3. Standardized regression coefficients are presented for those variables out of the seven attitudinal and informational measures which made a significant contribution to explaining the criterion variables. The standardized coefficients allow for comparisons of the relative predictive power of the variables entered into the equation and a test of attitudes versus cognitions in explaining the long-term effects.[3]

The control variables are introduced into the analysis in Table 3 to isolate change in the levels of the dependent variables due to Watergate. The controls serve as indicants of pre-Watergate influences; change not attributable to the control may result from the scandals. Comparisons of official party registration marginals with self-designated party affiliation shows a decrease from 42 to 26 in the percentage of sample members choosing the Republicans. Most of the gain is for the Independents, though the Democratic percentages do go from 41 to 46. The shift in persons desiring to vote for Richard Nixon during the period is equally dramatic. While 41% of the sample admitted to having voted for the disgraced president, only 16% said they would still do so. Sample members also reported less interest in the 1974 campaign than they said they had in general; voting in 1974 was lower for those interviewed than it was in 1972 and 1970, based on actual clerk's records on turnout. Comparisons for the remaining vote choice variables and campaign activity are not possible given the measures; the general patterns, however, do seem to be in the direction many observers feared. The sample, in keeping with the national trend, was less oriented toward the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates in 1974 and less active politically.

In the case of eight of the nine criterion variables examined in Table 3, at least one Watergate variable makes a significant contribution to explaining change. For most of the dependent variables, the attitudinal and informational variables are strong determinants of the shifts. Party affiliation is the rather striking exception to this picture.

An interesting and clearly interpretable pattern of effects emerges from Table 3. For the four candidate preference or vote choice variables, knowledge is not an important predictor of the post-Watergate decision. Instead, these variables are predicted relatively consistently by the attitudinal variables, particularly the belief that Watergate was unfair and the placing of blame on Nixon's staff. The activity variables in the lower half of the table, however, are predicted relatively consistently by the knowledge variable, coupled with cynicism about the scandals. The information stored about the scandal seems important in terms of non-directional, political behavior; attitudes lead to candidate choice as well as activity.

The direction of the relationships between the attitudinal and knowledge variables in Table 3 is relatively straightforward. Respondents who thought Watergate resulted from an anti-Nixon bias were less likely to vote Democratic in the three 1974 races and less likely to move from the earlier acceptance of Nixon. Respondents blaming Nixon's staff showed the reverse effects. Those who saw Watergate as normative and accepted a cynical view of the scandal were less likely to be interested or active in the 1974 campaign and less likely to vote. The vote findings hold whether the last congressional campaign or the 1972 race is used as control. Being knowledgeable about the scandals helped to reverse this trend to some extent. Those more knowledgeable respondents

were more likely to be interested, be active, and vote. While other variables have effects in Table 3 (believing in the cleansing nature of Watergate, for example, is related to activation), their patterns generally are not as pronounced.

To test the extent the weaker findings for the knowledge variable in Table 3 result from over-representation of the attitudinal variables, the regression equations were computed a second time eliminating all attitudinal variables but the unfairness and the cynicism clusters. Table 1 had shown knowledge to be negatively related to the former cluster and positively related to the latter. But neither relationship would be expected to be so strong as to unduly penalize the informational variable. These analyses, however, did not change the inferences from Table 3. The unfairness cluster remained the strongest predictor of vote choice; cynicism and knowledge remained strong predictors of activity. The actual beta weights differed little from those shown in Table 3.

Since Table 2 had shown strong evidence the fairness attitudinal cluster, the knowledge variable and, to a lesser extent, Watergate cynicism, resulted from media exposure, the possibility exists the findings in Table 3 for these variables are spurious. In addition to influencing the attitudinal and cognitive responses, the media could have a direct impact on the vote choice and activity variables. To control for this direct influence of media use, the exposure variable used in Table 2 was introduced as a control in the predictive equations. For the two attitudinal variables, this control made almost no difference. The introduction of media use, however, reduced the impact of the knowledge variable in each of the four cases in which it earlier had effects; the reduction was most drastic for the two turnout equations. These analyses further weaken the

role of the cognitions in explaining subsequent effects. This reduction cannot be explained solely in terms of the relationships between media use and the attitudinal and cognitive variables.

Conclusions

These data argue rather convincingly for a model of long-term media effects which includes attitudes and, to a lesser extent, cognitions as intermediate variables. The data show rather interesting patterns of media effects on these two types of variables. The attitudinal variables, at least, subsequently affect political decisions and activity; for the cognitive variables, the evidence of continued impact is less convincing.

The criterion variables sampled for study here do not completely represent the full range of possible second-level media effects. Cognitive variables might have been better predictors of other criterion variables, such as information seeking about the elections or other untapped aspects of campaign participation. But there is little reason to believe the picture would change much from that presented here.

While these data do not argue that cognitive effects of the media are unimportant, they do suggest attitudinal consequences are more interesting in terms of subsequent effects. Yet the existing research indicates the media generally have stronger effects on the cognitions. Perhaps it is the more complicated picture of attitudinal antecedents which also makes their effects more interesting.

NOTES

[1]The interviews were conducted by graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in research methodology courses in the Newhouse School at Syracuse University. While the contributions of each of these students to this research project are acknowledge, special thanks go to Daniel Valenti, Jay Lippincott III and Randy Beam for additional assistance.

[2]Student areas of the city were not included in the study.

[3]These same data were analyzed using discriminant analysis rather than regression. Discriminant analysis would seem to be the more appropriate technique given the categorical nature of most of the criterion variables. The results from the two techniques, however, were almost identical in terms of inference. Since regression coefficients are more common in the literature, and mechanical requirements of the SPSS version of discriminant analysis are more restrictive in terms of missing data options, the regression analyses findings are reported here. See Cooley and Lohnes, 1971, for a discussion of the two techniques. The authors acknowledge the assistance of David Weaver, Indiana University, in the data analysis.

Table 1

Correlations Among Attitude and Information Level Measures

(n = 331)

	Watergate Unfair	Watergate Activation	Watergate Cynicism	Blame System	Blame Staff	Blame Human Nature	Watergate Knowledge
Watergate Unfair	1.00						
Watergate Activation	-.20	1.00					
Watergate Cynicism	.11	.11	1.00				
Blame System	-.06	.04	.22	1.00			
Blame Staff	-.26	.37	.05	.20	1.00		
Blame Human Nature	.16	.01	.05	.15	.11	1.00	
Watergate Knowledge	-.40	.08	.16	-.08	.26	-.08	1.00

Note: Correlations of .11 or greater are significant at the .05 level, two-tailed test.

Table 2

Correlations Between Watergate Media Use and Attitude and Information Level Measures: For Total Sample and Within Party and Education Groups

	Total	Official Party Registration			Education	
	(n=331)	Dem. (n=134)	Rep. (n=136)	Ind. (n= 54)	Low (n=181)	High (n=150)
Watergate Unfair	-.37*	-.34*	-.29*	-.23	-.32*	-.38*
Watergate Activation	.39*	.50*	.44*	.13	.38*	.44*
Watergate Cynicism	-.09	-.10	-.08	-.06	.13	-.29*
Blame System	-.05	-.04	-.14	.03	-.01	-.12
Blame Staff	.30*	.18*	.34*	.31*	.24*	.34*
Blame Human Nature	.01	.01	.09	.12	-.01	.06
Watergate Knowledge	.43*	.44*	.37*	.37*	.37*	.46*

Note: Correlations designated with an asterisk (*) are significant at the .05 level, two-tailed test.

Table 3

Standardized Regression Coefficients for Long-Term Watergate Effects

Dependent Variable	Contr.	Water. Unfair	Water. Activity	Water. Cynic.	Blame Syst.	Blame Staff	Blame H.N.	Water. Know
Party Aff. (n=309)	.62*	-.07	.03	.00	.00	.03	-.04	.00
Vote Choice								
Governor (n=249)	.36*	-.21*	.03	.07	.04	.13*	-.12*	.03
Senator (n=238)	.34*	-.10	.03	.04	.19*	.09	.00	.05
Congress (n=254)	.13*	-.21*	.07	-.09	.02	.18*	-.08	-.02
Rec. 1972 (n=305)	.61*	-.17*	+.18*	+.02	-.03	+.08*	-.02	-.07*
Interest (n=332)	.63*	.06	+.06	-.15*	.01	.03	-.03	.08*
Activity (n=330)	.23*	-.06	.15+	-.14+	.05	.12*	-.02	.23*
Turnout								
Vs. 1970 (n=150)	.14*	.08	.12	-.19*	-.03	-.04	.15*	.07
Vs. 1972 (n=256)	.14*	.00	.11*	-.15*	-.11*	-.07	.02	.12*

Note: Control variables used were: party affiliation (official party registration); vote choice (official party registration, except in the case of 1972 vote reconsidered, where reported 1972 vote was used); interest and activity (general, non-campaign specific, levels of these same variables); and turnout (actual 1970 and 1972 vote). A high score for the first five dependent variables is a Democratic response; for the re-

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